TO LAY LIFE DOWN
May 27, 2007

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FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

John 15:12–17
Acts 2:1–12
Psalm 104:24–34

"No one has greater love than this,
to lay down one's life for one's friends."
John 15:13 (NRSV)

Homesickness is a universal condition. It is the dislocation of our hearts from the heart of God. It is one of the most persistent themes in scripture. Hildegard of Bingen wrote, "God's Son became human in order that humans would have a home in God." . . . God knows our deepest longing and does not leave us alone in our searching. God does not wait for us to find our way back. The Father sends the Son, and the Son sends the Spirit—
perhaps something akin to a divine search party. And part of the message of Pentecost is this: God comes to us God finds us where we are, and then that place—wherever it happens to be—begins to feel like home.

Mark Ralls, "Homesick"
Christian Century, 15 May 2007

O God, on this Memorial Day weekend,
as we remember those who have died in the service of their country,
remind us again that in life and in death we belong to our faithful savior,
Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.
Amen.

Whenever I am able, I watch the evening news on PBS. At the end of each broadcast, pictures are shown of the American armed forces personnel who died in recent days. Their pictures fill the screen: beautiful, mostly young, men and women, in uniform, their service rank, hometown and state, and age—twenty, twenty-three, thirty-four, sometimes forty. There is no commentary, no stirring patriotic music, just silence and the pictures. I know people who make a point of watching every night. It has become a solemn duty: a way of connecting somehow with what our young men and women are doing in Iraq and Afghanistan; what our nation is doing, whether

we approve of it or not; a way of remembering the lives and the sacrifices of our sons and daughters.

At a staff meeting a few weeks ago, while I was away, the topic was discussed. It was agreed that the war is a matter of deep concern: that people, all people, our people, have strong feelings about it and that everyone watches those pictures on television, in the newspaper, notices the daily reports, the steadily rising numbers, more than 3,600 now; everyone feels this deeply. So they wrote me a memo and asked that on Memorial Day weekend, in worship, we try to incorporate what is happening in the hearts of our people. So even though it is Pentecost Sunday, which observes the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the church, we're going to think and pray about what is happening to us and hold up to God our memories, the lives of all those we have lost, and our deepest hopes for peace.

That is not a new idea around here, by the way. During World War II, when millions of Americans were in uniform, fighting and dying in Europe and the islands of the Pacific, Fourth Presbyterian Church responded in several remarkable ways. There was a naval officer training program over at Northwestern, and on Sunday mornings officer candidates, in uniform, formed ranks, marched up Michigan Avenue and into the sanctuary for worship. Families in the congregation invited the young men home for Sunday dinner. Several years ago there was a reunion here, and a group revisited us on Sunday morning. They told us how much it had meant to them to be part of worship, but by far the best part was a delicious Sunday dinner and the opportunity to meet young women. In fact, they reported that several romances that became marriages after the war started during those dinners.

A few months after the beginning of the war, 104 members of the congregation were in it. Before it was over, 450 members of Fourth Presbyterian Church were in uniform, all over the world. The church formed a committee whose members stayed in touch with each one, writing letters regularly. The committee created a Fourth Church Honor Roll—a notebook with a page for each service person, a snapshot, a few lines about where they were, and their armed services postal address. Before the war was over, there were three books, and they were placed every Sunday on the Communion Table. We still have those books, and they are on a table this morning in Anderson Hall for your inspection after worship.

Every few years I ask our distinguished archivist, Bob Rasmussen, to find the books and let me have a look at them. I can't put them down. I did it again last week.

Durlin Abelman looks handsome in his uniform and spent all four years in the continental U.S.

Eleanor Allen is smiling in her sharp Women's Army Air Corps dress uniform.

Douglas Anderson, U. S. Army, apparently did not have a snapshot of himself in uniform when the church committee contacted him, so he drew one for them. It's very good, actually. He wrote to the committee, "This self-portrait was done in a tent by the light of a kerosene lamp by staring in a shaving mirror."

Florence Anderson, U.S. Navy WAVE is in there.

So are the two sons of Harrison Ray Anderson, Fourth Church Pastor at the time. Harrison Ray Anderson Jr.—"Lad"—in his Navy uniform and John Anderson, a Navy pilot. They are standing outside the manse, where they lived, and in a second photo are shaking hands at the Garth fountain. Lad, who became a minister after the war, stays in touch regularly. He and Lois are dear friends, and Lois is still a member of the congregation.

In the front is a page entitled "In Memoriam." It has a picture of Jesus and then three texts, one of them "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."

Fifteen church members died.

John Drummond, twenty-eight, was killed in action on December 31, 1941, just three weeks after Pearl Harbor.

James William Clark, twenty, was the son of a McCormick Theological Seminary faculty member.

William Francis McFarlin, twenty-five, a bombardier on a B-17, was shot down over Germany and captured and died in a German hospital.

Richard Hunter, forty-weven, must have been a career man. A lieutenant colonel, he was a regimental commander at Bataan, was captured and died when his Japanese prison ship was sunk.

A news clipping reported that "on Sunday, July 23, 1944, the congregation of the Fourth Presbyterian Church stood as Lieutenant Lewis Myer's death was announced."

The last name is John Timothy Stone Evans, grandson of the former Fourth Church Pastor, John Timothy Stone.

It is important to remember. I keep on my desk, amidst pictures of grandchildren, a snapshot of Private First Class John Calvin McCormick, my mother's youngest brother, for whom I am named, who was killed in June 1944 on Saipan. I remember him every day. We are part of one another in the church of Jesus Christ. Part of what happened on this day of Pentecost is that people from different nations, speaking different languages, were suddenly able to hear and understand each other. A community was formed on Pentecost that transcends boundaries of nation and race and language. We believe it is God's creation, that community of people bound to one another by God's love in Jesus Christ. That is what we mean when we say each Sunday morning, "I believe in the holy catholic church." That blessed community also transcends time: it includes all those who have gone before us, our own dear ones who we loved and lost and now live with God, and their dear ones, and the dear ones before them. That's what we mean when we say, "I believe in the communion of saints."

It is important to remember those who have gone before us, those who serve in the armed forces today, and those who are suffering and dying. Feelings and convictions about the war in Iraq are diverse and deep. People of good faith, starting at the same place—the security and safety of the nation and the peace of the world—come to diametrically opposite conclusions about what we are doing and how we are doing it, whether we should have invaded Iraq in the first place, whether we should leave, when we should leave. And, as is always the case, preachers on both sides invoke the name of God, God's justice, God's righteousness, to support their point of view. Abraham Lincoln pondered this irony in the midst of the Civil War. North and South read the same Bible, he said, pray to the same God; yet God did not answer the prayer of either side fully.

I have very serious reservations about our unilateral abrogation of Geneva Conventions that we were largely responsible for creating and that reflect this nation's highest and best moral commitments. I cannot understand why we continue to torture prisoners even though our own military leaders continue to warn us that torturing prisoners is counterproductive and dangerous, not to mention immoral. I cannot understand why when the topic was discussed by presidential candidates recently, those advocating torture were loudly applauded, while the one candidate who has been a prisoner of war and tortured disagreed, asked about the kind of nation we want to be, and was met with audience silence. I cannot understand how we can continue to talk about our hope to bring democracy and freedom to Iraq —or any country—while denying the very bedrock of democracy and freedom, habeas corpus, to hundreds of prisoners at Guantanamo. I cannot not express my reservations because I believe so very deeply in my nation's

highest and best principles, which come from the Judeo-Christian tradition, of the God-given dignity and rights and liberty of every man and woman in creation.

But my purpose this morning is to remember.

There was an article in the *Tribune* last Sunday that I found helpful as I thought about this sermon. It was about Army chaplain Captain John Barkemeyer, a Roman Catholic priest from Chicago. What I found compelling about Father Barkemeyer's story is that he has reservations and misgivings about what we are doing in Iraq, as I do. In a sermon in his Chicago parish he said, "There was no evidence of weapons of mass destruction; there didn't seem to be a need for a preemptive war; there was no connection between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda; and there was no urgency for a war to prevent further violence." And what everyone agrees on: the people we have designated as our evil enemies—al-Qaeda, the Taliban, Hamas, and Hezbollah—are more influential and stronger than ever.

Nevertheless, Father Barkemeyer volunteered. "It is not the place I would choose to be . . . but I'm supposed to be here," he told the *Tribune* reporter. "This is all about taking care of sons and daughters, not about the justice of the cause." And so he travels through the dangerous streets of Ramadi by Humvee, where some of the most violent attacks on American troops have occurred and where roadside bombs regularly kill soldiers, Marines, and civilians, to say mass and to visit with lonely and frightened young Americans. He has administered last rites to dozens of victims of car bombs and roadside bombs, prays with the wounded and dying in the military emergency room, is available at all hours of the night to talk with soldiers troubled by fear and religious uncertainty.

And in his quarters, Father Barkemeyer keeps a supply of children's books and a video camera so parents can read bedtime stories to their children 6,000 miles away.

God bless Father Barkemeyer. God bless those young parents. God bless their children. God bless them all.

"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

Jesus said that to his friends, his disciples at the table during what we know as the Last Supper. Later that evening he would be betrayed, arrested, tortured, and the next day he would be executed. He seems to know what is happening. And so it is time for summing it all up, time for final words. Biblical scholars call the lengthy monologue between the thirteenth and

seventeenth chapters of the Gospel according to John, “The Farewell Discourses.”

There are memorable images and phrases in those discourses:

> “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.”
>
> “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.”
>
> “I will not leave you orphaned: I am coming to you.”
>
> “I am the vine; you are the branches.”
>
> “Abide in me, as I abide in you.”
>
> “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”

And exactly in the middle, most memorable of all, given where they were and what was about to happen:

> “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

There is a powerful idea running throughout, a new way of thinking about God, about human life, about human relationships with God and with one another. Earlier John makes an astonishing assertion: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.” And elsewhere John makes an even more astonishing—and important—assertion: God is love. Not God is power. Not God is almightiness. Not God is righteous. Not God is judge. But God is love. And the love God is you are about to see, as God’s Son suffers and dies. It is love that lives for others, love that gives itself away, love that lays life down.

Theologians argue about what exactly happened when Jesus died on the cross. One of the traditional answers is that he died for our sins, that human sin so offends the righteousness of God that justice demands punishment. Someone has to pay. So God substitutes the Son, Jesus, for the ones who deserve the punishment. That’s classical atonement thinking, but many of us have never found it very satisfactory and find that it raises more questions about God than it answers.

There is another way of thinking about it. It is the way Jesus himself seemed to be thinking as he confronted his own death. “No one has greater love than this, to one lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” Distinguished New Testament scholar the late Raymond Brown, the authority on the Fourth

Gospel, said that the deeper you go into this text, the more the words *life* and *love* become interchangeable. “One of the great distinguishing characteristics of Christianity is here,” Brown said, “in the example of giving life away” (*The Gospel of John*, vol. 2, p. 682).

As he faced his own death, what Jesus wanted his friends to know was that the whole creation is full of God’s love; that he, himself—his life, his teaching, his death—was an expression, a picture of God’s love; that this human race, with all its amazing diversity, is the expression of God’s love; that all the religious traditions and rituals and theologies and institutions in the world are for the purpose of acknowledging, saying thank you for and pouring that love of God back into the life of the world.

And one thing more, one very personal thing: if you want to live your life fully, every year of it, every week and day and minute of it, you have to lay it down, give it away. You have to find someone or something you love so much that you are willing to live for it, or die for it.

At no point is Christianity more countercultural than here. This is not about getting the love you need; this is about giving your love, your life, away.

It is the Christian secret. To live the very best life you possibly can, you have to give it away—to a child, a beloved, your friends, your faith, your church, the great ideas and principles of our nation.

So may we remember, gratefully, all of them on this day.

And may we remember the one who taught us, and continues to teach us, the one who said, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

Amen.